

## Social and Political References in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

### **Liberal Unionist**

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A party concerned especially with individual rights, the rule of law, and questions of individual conscience (according to one dictionary), but advocating keeping Britain intact as a Union with Ireland. This is particularly interesting given Wilde's Irish heritage and his mother's political background.

*"I am a Liberal Unionist."* (Jack, 20)

### **modern education**

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During the late 1800s, the British government took a stronger hand in education, using such provisions as the Education Act of 1870 to provide schooling to children who had previously been unable to afford it, and to make education mandatory for all. The wealthy had been getting on quite well without government-regulated education, having the money to send their sons to private schools and prestigious universities, and enjoying the freedom to educate their daughters strictly from the home (perhaps with the aid of a governess). For many in the upper class, education meant little and was put to less use. Already secured of livelihood through land and inheritance, more focused on socialization, they found little use for philosophy, literature, or economics, let alone any practical skills that might be taught (the upper class was opposed to anything utilitarian). Perhaps there was some concern that further knowledge and awareness would bring questions directed toward the social system. Indeed, it was typically well-educated men (such as Wilde) who challenged Victorian values (though Oxford hadn't exactly praised his behavior).

*"The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound."* (Lady Bracknell, 18)

### **philanthropic work**

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The 19th Century saw a steep rise in societal concerns, and many Victorians began to take up the task of aiding the poor and ailing. Women of the middle class showed themselves to be particularly keen on such ventures, dedicating their spare time and energy to numerous societies (many of which were headquartered in London). This might have demonstrated a growing sense of humanity, but it has been said that much charity was sparked by more selfish reasons. Some women may have been seeking a way to spend time or improve their own skills, while others helped in order to impose their values on the poor (there was a wide-spread hope of pushing middle class values on the unruly masses). Whatever the intent, their work did improve conditions somewhat.

*“I suppose one of the many good elderly women who are associated with Uncle Jack in some of his philanthropic work in London.” (Cecily, 52)*

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### **Radical papers**

Publications, such as People’s Paper, that gave voice to extreme policies and were known for being outspoken, even brash. Largely connected with the working class, these papers of the “by the people, for the people” variety also supported and were supported by many among the middle class. By the end of the 19th century, radical papers had been drastically muted—though not entirely silenced—by ever-rising publication costs.

*“Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?” (Lady Bracknell, 20)*

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### **social legislation**

Laws enacted to aid the cause of the poor, or of those who have suffered inhumane abuse. Social legislation came as part of a widespread tide of social reform and philanthropic work, most of which was pursued by the middle class. Social issues and extensive involvement with reform were not seen to be a proper concern for the upper class, as the problems of the lower classes were far removed and—so they felt, if they noted the poor at all—no matter of theirs. Lady Bracknell’s remark suggests that anyone mixing with such uncouth people would be liable to meet a sticky end (after all, as she observes, look at what happened during the French Revolution).

*“Was he the victim of a revolutionary outrage? I was not aware that Mr. Bunbury was interested in social legislation.” (Lady Bracknell, 70)*

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### **temperance beverage**

A drink acceptable to those opposing alcohol (the drink might contain either no or very slight traces of alcohol). The temperance movement grew as part of Victorian England’s mania for social reform and philanthropic work. Alcohol was branded the devil’s brew (particularly in middle class eyes), an impression perhaps egged along by the devastation caused among the working classes by the ready availability of cheap gin. Of course, none of this stopped the upper class from downing its share of liquor.

*“Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of the Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days. Here is the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an incident that occurred at Leamington.” (Miss Prism, 80)*

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## **University Extension Scheme**

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These were courses that could be considered early developments in adult education, offered by universities to non-resident students and auditors. As with her reference to German scepticism, this may indicate that Gwendolen is more thoroughly informed than many young women of her class.

*“Her unhappy father is, I am glad to say, under the impression that she is attending a more than usually lengthy lecture at the University Extension Scheme on the Influence of a Permanent Income on Thought.” (Lady Bracknell, 69)*

## **TRANSPORTATION**

### **Brighton Line**

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Prior to 1924, Victoria Station was essentially two separate stations: The London Brighton South Coast Railway station and the London Chatham and Dover Railway station. The Brighton line itself connected London with Brighton, a popular seaside town located on the southern coast of England in East Sussex, approximately eleven miles east of Worthing. The first train from London to Brighton arrived in 1841.

*“The Brighton Line.” (Jack, 21)*

### **dog-cart**

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An open, two-wheeled cart that was drawn by horses. The cart seated a driver and two passengers, and was constructed to safely carry dogs (hence, of course, the name). Only the wealthy were able to afford to keep a cart and attendant horses, as well as the servants to maintain and drive these. Such carts would often be used for leisurely excursion as well as basic transportation.

*“Merriman, order the dog-cart at once.” (Jack, 44)*

### **omnibus**

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Horse-drawn wagon built to support many passengers, who paid to catch a ride. The omnibus (from Latin meaning “by, with, or from everybody”) became a popular mode of transportation within a city, following a regular route. The omnibus was particularly useful for those who could not afford to take a smaller, more fashionable cab. London’s system was overseen by the London General Omnibus Company. The word was eventually shortened to just ‘bus....

*“Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of the Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days.” (Miss Prism, 80)*

## **Railway Guide**

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A train timetable. Such guides could be almost overwhelmingly comprehensive, as they were by this time many trains to note. England's first passenger-carrying railway, running between Liverpool and Manchester, had opened in 1830. Although wary at first, the English had quickly grasped the benefit of this mode of transport, and as improvements were made (for comfort, speed, and safety), travel by train became immensely popular. Suddenly, it was possible to make quick trips from one end of England to another, to visit acquaintances and relations or simply take a day's trip to some place more amenable (say, a seaside resort). The rise of the railway came as part of the 19th Century's rapidly increasing pace of life.

*"Then picks up the Railway Guide." (stage direction, 26)*

## **Victoria Station**

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Major railway station in London. Until 1924, essentially composed of two separate stations: the London Brighton South Coast Railway (the Brighton Line) and the London Chatham and Dover Railway Station.

*"In the cloak-room at Victoria Station." (Jack, 21)*

## **MISCELLANY**

### **agricultural depression**

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The 1870s heralded an economic depression in England that was to last beyond the turn of the century. The depression could be largely attributed to the rise of global industry and increased competition with other nations; Britain was not able to keep up in the economic race (one of many signs that the Empire was perhaps not eternal or all-powerful), and a devastating outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 1883 did not help matters any. Partly as a result of this, land values took a turn for the worse, causing difficulties for many of the aristocracy, who claimed and might be supported by their expansive tracts of land. Indeed, as British merchants were rising through accumulations of cash, the aristocracy had begun to falter, having much land (becoming steadily less valuable) and little money.

*"Ah, this is what the newspapers call agricultural depression, is it not?" (Cecily, 57)*

### **Bunburyist**

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When a young man, Wilde may have made the acquaintance of a man called Bunbury (Richard Ellman suggests "Henry S. Bunbury"). It is more than likely that he was part of

the rather extensive, historical Anglo-Irish family of Bunbury—which originated in the 16th Century and continues to this day. Among various noteworthy members of the Bunbury clan, one was the aunt of Alfred, Lord Tennyson (author of the poem “Come into the Garden, Maude” sung in this production in a popular Victorian setting.)

*“...I have always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist; and I am quite sure of it now.” (Algernon, 7)*

### **General**

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The upper ranks in the British army, including those of generals, were almost uniformly (!) filled by members of the upper class, who paid to acquire their commissions. To maintain the life of an officer, it was necessary to have an outside source of income, as the costs of uniforms and the like (frequently including horses) far outweighed the salary earned in the military. Notwithstanding Gilbert and Sullivan’s HMS Pinafore, stories of men rising from office clerk to “ruler of the Queen’s Navies” (or Armies) were unheard of, and there were not the same opportunities to rise by merit as enjoyed by, say, a Ulysses S. Grant in the States. That he started off as a Lieutenant and was able to rise to General, and that his career spanned from at least 1840-1869, suggests that Moncrieff père made a career of the military, a fairly typical pursuit.

*“I cannot at the present moment recall what the General’s Christian name was.” (Lady Bracknell, 82)*

### **Oxonian**

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A graduate of Oxford University, along with Cambridge one of the two truly elite universities in England. Though there was academic rigor, it was typical for upper class men to attend a prestigious university, and equally typical that they not make practical use of their education—if indeed they acquired any at what often served them as an extended finishing school. College often proved more useful in establishing connections than instilling knowledge. Wilde himself attended Oxford and, though his behavior raised many a stir and an unfriendly eyebrow, he famously distinguished himself in his studies.

*“Untruthful! My nephew Algernon? Impossible. He is an Oxonian!” (Lady Bracknell, 74)*  
*“It is rather Quixotic of you.” (Cecily, 35)*

### **respectability**

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“Respectability” held different shades of meaning for the different classes, but was perhaps most strongly connected to the middle class. To be respectable was to be utterly

moral and hard-working, the picture of middle class virtue. Such virtue and industrious labor was neither attractive nor impressive to those of the upper class.

*“She is the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability.” (Chasuble, 77)*

### **Scotland Yard**

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Common nickname or shorthand for the Metropolitan Police force, created in 1829 and named for the location of its headquarters at 4 Whitehall Place, backing into Great Scotland Yard.

*“I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard about it.” (Jack, 5)*

### **womanthrope**

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A word made up by Miss Prism (a neologism, in fact) for a person who hates women, a play on misanthrope and an alternative to misogynist. See also Wilde in *The Critic as Artist*: “It is sometimes said of them [reviewers] that they do not read all through the works they are called upon to criticise. They do not. Or at least they should not. If they did so, they would become confirmed misanthropes, or if I may borrow a phrase from one of the petty Newnham graduates, confirmed womanthropes for the rest of their lives.”

*“A misanthrope I can understand--a womanthrope, never!” (Miss Prism, 36)*

### **your book**

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The register in which the butler or manservant would record household accounts, purchases, and consumption, including—as here—use of the wine “cellar.” This was partly to discourage theft or fraud on the part of the servant, but was obviously subject to massive abuse. Many of these books survive and give a great look at domestic life of the day.

*“Oh! ... by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.” (Algernon, 1)*

“Glossary.” Digital Dramaturgy. Centerstage.org. Updated October 4, 2009. Web. 12.29.2011.